Sigtryggur Jonasson

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Sigtryggur Jonasson

Sigtryggur Jonasson, "the Father of New Iceland" epitomized the spirit of discovery and adventure immortalized in the sagas of his Viking ancestors. In September, 1872, he became the first Icelander to settle in Canada and a few years later was instrumental in the establishment of the New Iceland colony in Manitoba.

Iceland was settled in 874 by Vikings from Norway whose descendants explored the northeastern coastline of North America at the dawn of the eleventh century. This spirit of exploration was rekindled among Icelanders in the 1860s after a harsh winter and an epidemic carried away 200,000 sheep and crippled the nation's economy. With little hope for a future in Iceland, over forty people left for Brazil between 1863 and 1873. In 1870 four men settled on Washington Island in Lake Michigan despite warnings from their relatives that they would be eaten alive "hide and all" in the new land. Their glowing reports from North America appeared in newspapers in the homeland and encouraged many more to emigrate. One of those inspired by thoughts of the new world was a young man of nineteen, Sigtryggur Jonasson.

Jonasson was born into a family of comfortable means at Baki, Oxnadalur in 1852. Like all Icelanders of his day, he was educated at home by his parents and local minister. At the age of fourteen, he entered the service of an influential bureaucrat at Möoruvellir, and eventually became his secretary and assistant. Fluent in Danish, Sigtryggur had also learned some English by the time he left for North America at age twenty.

During his voyage overseas the young Icelander met an elderly Ontario Scotsman who warned the young immigrant not to drink any water from the St. Lawrence without adding a "wee drop" of whiskey to it, and who advised him to continue on to Ontario where he would find the finest land on the continent. Jonasson suffered no ill effects from the St. Lawrence water, and he did travel to Ontario where he worked at various jobs in Kingston, St. Thomas, and Bismarck. In the winter of 1872-73 he went into a business partnership selling railroad ties and earned over $1,100.

Jonasson's enthusiastic letters home encouraged the immigration of 126 Icelanders who settled in the Roseau district of Ontario in 1873 on homestead land which he had helped to locate. In 1874, the Ontario Government appointed Jonasson as the immigration agent sent to meet a large group of Icelanders expected that summer. Under his guidance, 350 immigrants settled at Kinmount. Here the men worked during the winter on the unfinished railroad, grubbing out huge stumps and blasting through miles of pre-Cambrian granite. Discontent soon arose over poor housing, low wages, limited supplies and the absence of good homesteading land, a commodity which few of the struggling settlers could afford. Morale dropped to its lowest point after many of the colonists were persuaded to settle in Nova Scotia. The maritime venture failed miserably and most of the inhabitants returned west by 1882. Despite these difficulties, Jonasson established a store in partnership with a Canadian whom he eventually bought out.

That same year a Scottish missionary named John Taylor also began to take an active interest in the fate of the Icelanders in Canada. His request that the

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Jonasson at age twenty-two with Pall Johansson on his left

Canadian Government found an Icelandic colony in the sparsely settled west was well received by the Minister of Immigration. Governor-General Lord Dufferin, who had visited Iceland in 1856 and had been impressed by a nation without prisons, soldiers or police, also supported Taylor's idea.

The people of Kinmount elected Jonasson, John Taylor and Einar Jonason to journey westward to select a site for a separate colony. The three chose land in the Keewatin district, on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg because of its accessibility, abundance of timber, grazing land and plentiful supply of fish.

After some deliberation the inhabitants of Kinmount decided to move to "New Iceland" in the fall of 1875. John Taylor led the Kinmount group to Winnipeg where they proceeded down the Red River by York boat and flatboat, landing at Willow Point, near present-day Gimli, on 21 October 1875. Jonasson, who had actively promoted the venture throughout Ontario, returned to Iceland at the request of the Canadian government to attract more settlers. Of the thousands of people left destitute by volcanic eruptions on the island, Jonasson

recruited approximately 1,200 for the new colony. Under his direction, the group left Iceland and made a six day journey directly to Quebec, rather than taking the arduous three week voyage via Scotland or England. Jonasson's wife, Rannveig Olafsdottir Briem, was among those who set sail with the immigrants. During the summer of 1876 they arrived in New Iceland where they joined their compatriots from Kinmount.

On his first journey from Winnipeg to the settlement Jonasson met a delegation of three Icelanders and an Indian named Ramsey who were on their way to Winnipeg to settle a boundary dispute. Apparently, Ramsey and a number of Indian families who lived on the north bank of the Icelandic River believed that the nearby settlement extended only to the south side of the river. When Icelanders landed on the north shore, they were met by a group of armed Indians. The dispute was settled when a government representative informed the delegation that New Iceland ran to the north side of the river. The Icelanders invited their Indian neighbours to remain in the area, and John Ramsey became a valued member of their community. He led hunting expeditions and worked heroically during the smallpox epidemic of 1876-77 which resulted in the deaths of over 100 settlers, including his own wife and four children.

With the safe arrival of the early Icelandic pioneers, the tasks of homesteading and colony administration soon occupied Jonasson. During the first difficult years, federal government loans enabled the destitute settlers to survive. In 1876 John Taylor acted as Ottawa's representative within the colony's government and supervised the loans. Sigtryggur Jonasson apportioned supplies and kept a record of payments. The colonists were separated into groups of forty to eighty men, and each unit leader distributed the monthly allotments among the people. Food was divided equally according to the number in each family, and other goods according to individual need and circumstances.

Jonasson was instrumental in establishing self-government for the colony. Before his arrival a five man committee had been chosen to govern Gimli. In 1877 the council, under Jonasson's direction, agreed on temporary measures for governing the colony, quickly drafting a constitution and legal code. The resulting constitution is unique in Canada and has been of considerable interest to legal experts. The district council had jurisdiction over local matters such as roads, care of the poor, evaluation of estates of deceased persons, and the provision of counsellors for widows and trustees for orphans. Public meetings for the discussion of local affairs were held annually. A voter had to be twenty-one years of age, a permanent resident of the colony and had to possess an unblemished character. Sigtryggur's role in shaping this constitution was probably his finest achievement, but it is often overlooked among his many other accomplishments.

Amid the hardships of life in the struggling colony, Jonasson and a few others made plans for the establishment of the first Icelandic publication in North America, a paper called *Framfari* or *Progress*. Most of the shareholders were poor and lost their meagre savings on the venture but believed that an Icelandic publication was essential to the survival of their language. Jonasson edited the first eight issues before Halldor Briem assumed the responsibility, and the newspaper was printed in a log cabin by Sigtryggur's brother James.

Framfari.

1. ÁRG. LUNDI, 10. SEPTEMBER 1877. Nr. 1.

TIL KAUPENDA OG LESENDA FRAMFARA.

Í ár hið ég Framfara Nýja Íslands senda yður hér fyrsta sinnar af hinu fyrsta tímariti, sem prentað er á Íslandi í Ameríku á hinni fimm-tugustu eða hálendu hæga, síðan vér fórum yfrar mark miklu vatnsins-mikla.

Hvaða og hálendingar fóru að dreyma til heimaeldu þessarar að vera. Sér að hvorki vjer sjálfir þekkjum ekki fyrir þeir, að þeir mundu hinn hæga skóg og þjóðlend hjer, vera þeir gjörðu eftirkomendum til að vilhalda þeir. Hefir þetta mikli hvalli verið vor, að vera vel undirbúnir til að vilhalda þessa dýrmætu arfleifð fyr oss. Annað var að Íslendingar urpfundu nýlenda sína fyrir sig, en hitt að hjer í Ameríku væri gnótt af tímariti á Íslandsku. Þetta tvent skyndur nú í vera sönn samhandi hvað við annað, að vorir vor hugsandi að semd gott fra hinu þvíðst. Skorgt hafa verið rætt um að stofna Íslandsk nýlendur, og jafnvel gjörðir og bráðabirgðar tilraunir til þess í ýmsum hjeruðum þessa lands, en ekkert verulegt orðið úr því þar til nýlenda þessi var stofnuð. Það á satt hafa vegur tilraunir verið gjörðar til að gefa út blað eða tímarit á Íslandsku hjer í landi, en það hefir hvað mest verið sökum þess, vegna, að blaðaútgefendur í Vesturheimi, er reynslubók á þjóðlendi blaðalaga (1874) í Bláreyðum að stofna til þess.

Þegar svo var hvorki að mergja af þeim blaðaútgáfum er áður hafa til Ameríku verið stofnaðir í nýlendu þessari, sem hafa aldrei haldist fyr-ir vorum hef hafa dáðst, sem skiljanlegt var, að það væri ofhættuvert nýlendubúa að vagla „á“ fjöru þar hálfan vagl „á“. Nýlendumenn hafa nú að vísu fundið til þarfarinnar fyrir tímarit á Íslandsku, en allt vantað á mátt þeir að fyrirkomi þeirra hvorki á fyrr en nú. Annar, og sjálfsagt hin dýrmætasta vellíðnið, er dreifa yfir nýlendurnar í hverri er hafi, og sem hjálpast hvor upp á annan. Hvað nýlendan dreifðgjörð að eiga þvíðstæðar eiginn. En sönn og vellíðnið þetta af fáru sama að hvorki sem það. Var þessu svið fyrst hvapt að hreifa var á Gimli 31. Júlí. þ. á. og varð það fáir síðar að hafi semd að vegna blaðaútgáfu til að hvapa þessu og til undirbúning á-kvæði. Vildu þá nokkrir menn að eiga að fáreyga hafnið saman en að hvapa blaðafjelag, og skyldu þeir hafa hvað þar hafði orðið ágengt á fundi er haldinn var á Gimli 3. Ágúst. Voru þá kosnir sex menn hafnið að fjelagið vandi undirbúi, hafnið og hafnvegar hins fyrirhug-aða blaðafjelags hins fyrirhug-aða blaðafjelags hafnið er hin stofnar. Til fjelagsstofnunar stóru til að þessir þeir er vant þeirði, en stofnun þess að hafnvegsfundurinn hjer í landi skal hafa á vorinu hinum mesta af þeim stöðum, sem stofnunar hins blaðafjelags, vandi að fá þá stuðning. Sjálfsagt þeirra var fyrir, að gjarnan vandi stöðvarnir skal hvapt hing-að fyrr en 1 júní. Hinn gjöfmesti hvalli var sem Jón Sigurðsson í Minneapolis gaf: 1 mill vandi að hvapa gjarnan og hvalli. Kostnaður vjer hvapnn hvapa þeirði fyrir alla fyrirhafnir hvapa í þessa stöðvar.

Jafnvel þó svo sem vandi undirbúningur á-hvalli til prentsmiðjunnar, og annarg undirbúi af hvapnn vjer þurftum að fá áður vjer gjöfnum gefið hvalli út, þá hvíldum vjer samt að eiga hvalli í þeirra von að þessi hvalli og hvar, sem vjer þegar hefðum hvalli um, vandi hvapli svo hvalli, að það eigi hvalli ár-gjöfu hvalli.

Eins og vorum gefin gjöf af hvalli-gjafahvapnn fyrirgjöfnu vora hvalli í þessu hvalli, er það eðal til-gangur fyrirgjöfnu, að gefa út tímarit, sem eje fe-lendingum í Ameríku til eyrahnnar, fróðleiks og skemtunar og til að vilhalda íslenzkri þjóðvern og tungu. Með öðrum orðum, það á að stuðla að [illegible] þeirra í nafnlausu og blandaðan ein-[illegible] þessari fyrirgjöfnu þannig á að vera fræðandi, skemtandi og umræðu þessa hvalli. Allnm vjer eiskur vel til hvalli, að nafna vjer „Framfara“.

Allar nauðsynlegar þjóðir hin og þekkja nauðsyn og þýðingu tímarita og dagblaða, en engin þekkir eig Ameríku-menn, enda hafa þeir vilhaldnga þeir hvalli, hver þess vegna vand, og það svo vand vilhar á, vera eiður þeir upplýsingar og hvalli-hvalningar sem hvalli vilhaldnga. Það hvalli-gar þjóð vel í þessu hvalli hvalli, þá gefa fræðir, þeir vilhar, hvað vel af hvalli-vandi hvalli, þannig þeir vel vilhaldi á vorgjarna sem fræðir þeirra vilhja. Og þessum hvalli-gar, vilhar hvapnn, vor hvalli skemmtir, vilhar og vandvalli hvalli-vandi, þá vera vorgjarna vandi þeirra vil er hvalli-vandi þeirra í þessa hvalli. Vjer vonum þvi hin vor mikig vandvalli um vil hvalli þeir þeirra vilhaldnar hvalli-vandgar í þessa vilhaldi, en vjer vonum, og hvalljum vil vorra hvalli gjar þess vera hver í sýt.

Vjer vonum hin en vand um vil hvalli hvalli þeir vilhaldnar hjálpir og vilhaldnadi og af hvalli-gar í Ameríku þar hvalli. Hvalnn vjer í þeir þeirri hvapli um hjálpvilhaldnu á þessum vilhaldi. Þeir vil vand vandnn vjer gott hvapli af hvalli hjálpnn af hvalli. Hvalli vandir hjálpir í Ameríku þar hvalli, og hr Evelyn, þá er þeir vandi vilhaldnadnn hvalli, vil gott hjálpir þeirra, vor vil vilhaldnagar hvalli gagn af. Kunnir þeirra til af þeir, vil hvalli-lagar vor eru vilhaldi á vapir vilhaldnar hvalli vandir vilhaldnar vil í hvalli-nar, og þeirði þeir, til þess þeir gefir vilhaldi vand hjá og hjá í hvalli-vandi hvalli, vil gefir vilhaldnar þeirra hvalli vil og vand hvalli-vandi vil vilhaldnar hvalli. Þá vjer hvalli vilhaldnar vil á vilhaldnar þeirra vor gjarnhvapi vor þeirði þá vilhaldnar vjer þeir gjöra vand þeirra til að hvalli hr þeirra.

Vilhaldnagar og vilhaldnagar upplýsnnar vilhaldnar vjer gefa vor vilhaldi vand vjer hvalli-þeirg á.

Hlutnnar til ársnnar vilhaldnar vjer hin hvalli hvalli vandvalli vandgar og vilhaldnar, en þá vonum vor vjer hin hvalli vandhvapnn gefir í hvalli-vand.

Hjálpnnar vilhaldnar vjer gefa gnnn og vonn, vilhaldnar hvalli-gar vand af hvalli, hvalli hvalli-gar vilhaldnar hvalli. Allir nnn vandi vilhaldnir vand af vand, en vil þá hvalli-vandnn, en þá vonum vjer vand vand vandnn vand hvalli-vandi af þeirði vilhaldnar hvalli. Og vilhaldnadi þá í gnnnnn af vjer vand hvalli-gar.

Vjer vilhaldnar vand hvapnn hvalli vilhaldnar vand hvalli-vandnn og hvapnn, hvalli-vandnn þeir hvalli-gar vilhaldnar og hvapnn, hvalli-vandnn þeir hvalli-gar vand vandnn vand vand vand

Reverend Jon Bjarnason once lamented that, while *Framfari's* subscribers were plentiful, the collection of subscription fees was almost impossible. Despite its financial difficulties, the paper drew favourable comments, and an attempt was made to capture an anglophone audience by printing a condensed English version of the news on its back pages. Seventy-four issues of *Framfari* were published from September 1877 to January 1880. Although most of its stories concentrated on local events, it also carried reports on Canadian and Icelandic affairs. Thanks to the commitment of Jonasson and the paper's other founders, *Framfari* remains as virtually the only record of the settlement's early years and an invaluable historical document.

Framfari was only one of Sigtryggur Jonasson's enterprises in the new colony. In 1879 he and Fridjon Fridricksson purchased the steamer *Victoria* and two barges. In addition to providing a much needed method of transportation for the settlers, the small company also offered jobs and wages to a colony that was being decimated by migration to North Dakota. By the mid 1880s, at the height of the migration south, only about fifty families of the original 400 were still living in New Iceland. Business ventures such as the steamer and a sawmill, which Jonasson and his partner later moved to Manigotogan, attracted new settlers and encouraged the original colonists to remain or return to New Iceland. As a result of his business enterprises and personal initiative, Jonasson has been hailed as the saviour of the colony during its most trying period.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The *Victoria* with Sigtryggur Jonasson on board, 1905

In 1880 Sigtryggur moved to Selkirk where he operated his steamship company and the boat for which he was given the honorary title of "Captain". He continued to serve New Iceland, and in 1886 was elected to a five man committee formed to discuss the supervision and employment of new immigrants. In 1887, after New Iceland was incorporated into the province of Manitoba, Jonasson was largely responsible for establishing the settlement's first municipal government.

The Icelandic entrepreneur then moved to Winnipeg where he sold insurance and real estate. Shortly after his arrival he helped to found another Iceland newspaper called *Lögberg* or *Tribune*, and secured the prominent Icelandic author, Einar Kvaran as its editor. When Kvaran returned to Iceland in 1895, Jonasson became editor, a position he held until 1901. In 1887, he also provided financial assistance to the Icelandic Lutheran congregation led by Reverend Jon Bjarnason for the construction of a church in Winnipeg.

Jonasson entered the political arena in 1896. He was elected as Liberal MLA for St. Andrews and became the first Icelandic elected representative in Canada. Throughout his political career he was opposed and later defeated by his cousin, Conservative Party member, B.L. Baldwinsson. Debates between the two candidates were often long and heated. In the midst of one such altercation, Jonasson bombarded Baldwinsson with a few choice references to his character and his cousin retorted with the observation that these qualities seemed "to run in the family".

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Sigtryggur Jonasson as Liberal M.L.A. for St. Andrew's

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Sigtryggur Jonasson's cousin and political rival, Conservative M.L.A., B.L. Baldwinsson, 1903

Through his political connections, Sigtryggur fought to have a railway line extended to New Iceland. His Liberal party ties with the Laurier administration were also instrumental in his appointment as homestead inspector for the Interlake District from 1901 to 1906. Jonasson also continued to visit Iceland periodically. During one of these visits he gained the support of three Icelandic parliamentarians and an Englishman for a scheme to establish monthly steamship passages between Reykjavik and Liverpool. The ships were to be outfitted with cold storage lockers filled with fresh fish destined for the British market. The proposal, which included a request for exclusive rights to build a railway in Iceland, was brought before the Icelandic parliament but denied. Shortly afterwards, a Danish company established an identical shipping operation.

In 1906 Icelandic farmers in Manitoba began to complain that their livestock was being retailed at a much higher price than the amount they had received in payment. Jonasson and Albert Jonsson responded by setting up a cooperative marketing system. Their plan was to buy the animals at the usual price, and then slaughter and market the meat for a profit. The gains were to be returned to the farmers in proportion to the number of animals they had originally provided. The two men invested $250,000 in the scheme and in 1907 purchased a slaughterhouse on Portage Avenue. The company went bankrupt, and many of the farmers who had participated in the venture suffered heavy losses. Both Jonasson and his partner were harshly criticized by their clients and the Icelandic press for their part in the fiasco.

Jonasson does not appear to have benefitted from the venture. He had very little money during the latter part of his life and spent his final years in a shanty on his homestead, with his nephew Thomas in Riverton or at the home of his stepson Percy at Arborg. In 1930 he was chosen as one of three Icelandic-Canadians sent to celebrate the millenium of Iceland's parliament. Caught up in socializing with his old acquaintances, Jonasson did not make it to the official ceremonies. After his death in 1942, most of the documents and personal records which he had meticulously collected and preserved, were carelessly burned.

Throughout his sixty-eight years in the new land Jonasson served as an important leader for the Icelandic settlers. When they arrived in Manitoba in 1875, it was Jonasson who advocated the value of an isolated colony where the Icelandic culture, language and religion would be allowed to flourish. He encouraged his people to learn English and to participate in the society around them, but believed that without proper guidance the Icelanders would disperse and their culture would disappear from North America. By 1936, Jonasson felt that the Icelanders had been "assimilated" into Canadian society and that he himself was firmly rooted in Canadian soil. When asked how long he intended to stay in Iceland during the 1930 millenium celebration he replied, "only until the boat comes back".

Like Eric the Red, 1000 years before, Sigtryggur Jonasson led his people to a new land where their descendants and traditions would flourish. Through the publication of *Framfari*, he helped to ensure the survival of the Icelandic language in North America. He provided strong leadership for his countrymen, was instrumental in establishing self-government for New Iceland and later became the first

Icelandic elected representative in Canada. Sigtryggur Jonasson left his comfortable position in Iceland to brave the hardships of the new land and this true spirit of adventure remained with him to the end of his days.

Courtesy *The Icelandic Canadian*

Memorial to Sigtryggur Jonasson at Riverton, dedicated on the Riverton community's centennial, 7 August 1976

Suggestions for Further Reading

Three Icelandic newspapers, *Framfari* (1877-1880), *Heimskringla* (1895-1901 and 1906-1909) and *Lögberg* (1895-1901) provide valuable information on the Icelandic settlement in Manitoba and the life of Sigtryggur Jonasson. Among the various articles and books in both English and Icelandic which include references to Jonasson and the New Iceland settlement are: Dr. W.J. Kaye's , "Captain Sigtryggur Jónasson", *Icelandic Canadian* (Winter, 1960); Sigtryggur Jonasson's, "The Early Icelandic Settlement in Canada", *The Historical and Scientific Society, Transaction No. 59* (March 1901); Benjamin Kristjansson's *Vestur-Íslenzkár AEviskrár,* Vol. 1, Reykjavik: 1964 and Runolfur Marteinsson's, *AEvisaga séra Jóns Bjarnasonar,* Akureyri: Edda, 1969.

Credits

The cover photograph of Sigtryggur Jonasson is printed courtesy of the Manitoba Archives.

Sigtryggur Jonasson 1852 - 1942

Born at Baki, Iceland, this publisher and entrepreneur became a prominent leader in the Canadian Icelandic community. As immigration agent he brought from Iceland more than a thousand people driven from their homeland by a volcanic eruption. They settled in 1876 on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg. Homesteading near Riverton, he was instrumental in establishing the unique laws and constitution of the Republic of New Iceland.

In 1877 he founded *Framfari*, the first Icelandic newspaper on this continent. This was supported by the community of fishermen and farmers in spite of severe economic hardship and a smallpox epidemic. He also founded *Lögberg* in Winnipeg. These newspapers contributed greatly to the survival in North America of Icelandic language and literature.

Jonasson became a M.L.A. in 1896, the first elected Icelandic-Canadian legislator. In 1930 he was chosen to represent Canada at the millenium of Iceland's Parliament.

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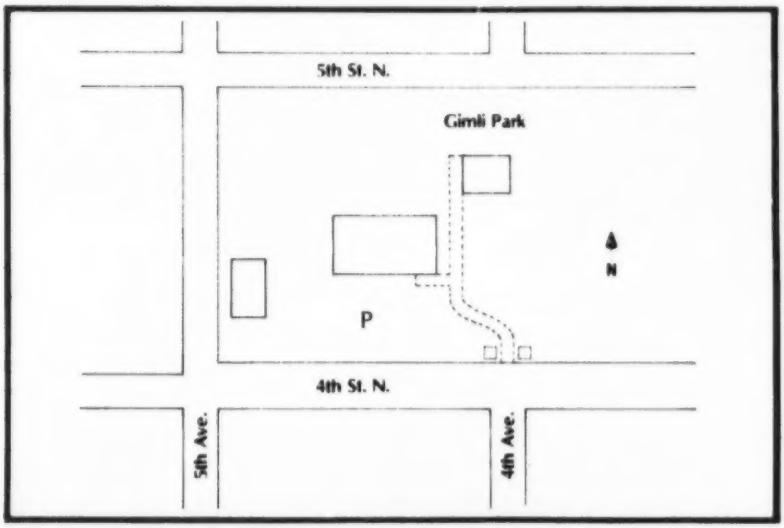

This plaque is located in the town park, Gimli, Manitoba